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Chapter Two: Angelique II

Spring, 2028

"How cute..."

"Besides that shed, there's not a single building in sight, and the way the land slopes makes it seem endless..."

Angelique and I stood in a vast field. Beside us was a small structure resting along the dirt path that had brought us there. The sky was mostly clear, with occasional clouds covering the sun intermittently, creating a soothing and almost drowsy atmosphere, punctuated by distant bird songs. Above us, an endless blue expanse with white patches, and below, an apparently eternal path of white flowers swaying gently when the wind decided to blow. The path was wide, bordered only by forest on both sides. In the distance, the land rose gently, preventing any further view and creating an illusion about the path's length. Regarding the type of plants, even today, three years and a bit later, I have no idea.

"Let's keep going, we need to make use of the daylight. This place must have belonged to someone, and it's likely we'll find their house if we continue through the flowers."

I didn't expect a response from Angelique and, without removing my hands from my rifle, I advanced over the vast white sheet, hardly worrying about stepping on one plant or another.

"We'll take supplies there, and if we find one, a map. Just moving by cardinal directions is..."

It was normal for our conversations to be 95% my words, but what wasn't normal was not hearing her footsteps behind me. I stopped as soon as I noticed this irregularity and turned, slightly concerned.

"..."

Angel was crouched on the ground, fixated on a single flower that was no different from the rest; literally just another in the bunch. Her face was as impassive as ever, but her eyes were a bit wider, showing keen interest in the small blossom with several petals.

"Angel, we need to keep moving."

Of course, I understood that while that field was merely charming to me, for Angelique, it could be a utopian scene she never imagined existed. She only had a few months of memories, and they were filled with death, ruins, and bad people. I couldn't blame her for being so captivated by this sight... but we couldn't afford to stop.

"Ah... Yes, let's go."

Upon hearing my voice call her name, she quickly collected herself and stood up, hurrying towards me. We continued our journey without much haste, enjoying the peaceful sensation the landscape provided. After a few minutes, the wind began to blow slightly stronger, but not enough to be bothersome; on the contrary, it was pleasant, lifting the aroma released by the flowers.

Angelique beside me couldn't keep her senses in check and couldn't hide it, no matter how hard she tried. Her eyes gently roamed the field, appreciating the individuality of each flower, while her back straightened a little every time a breeze brought the earthy scent to our noses.

First five, then ten, and then fifteen minutes passed. The path was long, and the tranquility it exuded only made my weapon feel heavier. At some point, both Angel and I grew sluggish, and we slowed our pace.

"The owners of this field must have taken great care of it... If you look to the sides, only a few shoots extend beyond the path... there's not much weed either. For it to have been preserved so well... I wonder how long it's been abandoned."

"..."

"A while ago, you were really captivated by the color of the flowers. I understand if you want to take one or two, but let me tell you it's useless; they'll wither too

soon."

"No."

"Hm? No what?"

"I don't want to take one."

"Any particular reason?"

"They look much prettier all together than apart."

As Angel uttered her last words, she lifted her left hand, revealing two individual flowers she had apparently picked without my noticing.

"... Yes, that's also a good reason."

We stood in silence for a few seconds until a stronger gust than before blew through, lifting some pollen along with many petals.

"Huh..."

Angel raised her hand to shield her eyes, and the flowers she held were carried away

with the fragments of their siblings. The corollas soared high, drifting into the forest, soon disappearing from my view. Before the wind ceased, I glanced back at Angelique. She still covered part of her face with one hand against the wind that showed no sign of stopping. The scene before me was sublime.

"You are..."

I swallowed my words and just observed. Angel's shy face barely hidden from the wind that tousled her shoulder-length hair violently, and the hundreds of petals behind her. The field's aroma, the sun's warmth, and the cool breeze made me realize that, even if such a beautiful scene seemed like it was from a postcard, no camera in the world could capture such beauty, nor could any artist paint a work that evoked in me what this sight did. Beautiful. Angel simply looked beautiful. To use more words or try to define how would only complicate the matter unnecessarily. I dare say I had never seen

anything that moved me so, and all the horrors I had witnessed paled in comparison to the impact of this young woman who, just by standing there shielding her eyes, took my breath away.

"I didn't hear you well."

"Forget it, it wasn't important."

But it was.

My face probably expressed at least a fraction of what I felt, because Angel tilted her head slightly in doubt.

"Angel, are you cold?"

"No. The wind is refreshing, but the sun is quite strong."

My clothes were much heavier and shielded me from the elements, but Angelique, aside from the thin long jacket that offered some protection, wore shorts that might let more of the chill through.

I waited a few seconds, then exhaled a

short sigh as I secured my Galil and let it fall to the side.

"Alez?"

"I've decided we'll rest here. It's only been a few hours since sunrise and we've been walking a long time."

She didn't even think to contradict me and nodded.

I let my body's weight take over and sat on the ground. Closer to the earth, the effect of the field's aroma intensified.

"I'll eat later, but you can go ahead if you want."

"No. I'm not hungry now."

I shrugged off my backpack and placed it nearby, then let my back fall onto the ground. I lay on my back in a sea of white flowers.

I heard Angel sit down a couple of meters from me and closed my eyes. I

wasn't really tired, but the atmosphere was perfect, and not taking time to relax would be a waste. I felt my mouth's muscles tense involuntarily, and let out a lazy yawn as my eyes moistened a bit. I shouldn't have let myself be carried away by the sensations... In any case, resisting was futile. Second by second, my eyelids grew heavier, my breathing became more peaceful, and before I knew it, I fell asleep to the sound of rustling plants.

. . .

"Ugh..."

As soon as consciousness returned, I propped myself up on one hand and opened my eyes, yawning again. The sun had traveled a good distance, and it wouldn't be long before the first orange hues appeared on the horizon.

"Shit. We lost too much time. Angel..."

I looked around for my young companion while rubbing my eyes, but she wasn't nearby.

"Angel...?"

I stood, stretching my legs, and everything made sense. A few meters away, I found Angelique. She was lying on the ground asleep, with a beautiful expression of peace on her face, hidden by the flowers. I wondered if she even noticed she must have lost sight of me when she lay down.

"Angel, wake up. Who knows how many hours we've been sleeping."

I was about to shake her by the shoulders, but my hands stopped before touching her. Surrounded by that perfect white with such a serene expression... she looked so pure and delicate that I didn't want to shake her too much. Instead, I placed my right hand on her head and

played a little with her hair. The black strands falling over her cheek contrasted with the pale blossoms, but even that looked beautiful.

I tried to make my voice sound as calm as possible as I leaned closer to her.

"Angelique, we have to continue."

A barely audible whimper escaped her lips as her brows arched slightly forward. Perhaps she was dreaming something pleasant, because upon waking and opening her eyes, she stared into nothingness for a moment, as if recalling the last thing she saw before lifting her eyelids. It didn't take her long to notice my hand on her head, and though she seemed mildly intrigued by it, she chose to ignore it and, without much fuss, lifted herself off the ground and dusted off her clothes.

"Judging by the sunlight, we must have slept for five or even six hours. We'll find

the house I mentioned and spend the night there."

"No."

"Hm? No what?"

"I didn't sleep that long."

Understanding each other would have been much easier if she didn't have the habit of speaking in sentences of no more than five words.

"So... did you stay silently waiting for me to wake up?"

Angelique looked me in the eye and nodded curtly. Her gaze didn't show annoyance or displeasure, but I still felt a bit guilty for making her wait so long.

"How patient..."

I murmured those words, picking up my rifle and backpack. I should emphasize that I knew there wouldn't be any

problems later even if I left my rifle exposed in such a windy, dusty environment; the ACE 52 has a perfectly sealed firing system that prevents any dirt from entering. Convenient for the occasion.

"Let's make the most of the remaining daylight."

I didn't wait for Angelique's response and started walking. The breeze was blowing more insistently now, almost constantly, no longer as soothing as it had been hours ago. After a few minutes of walking, the temperature began to drop. The air brushing my neck grew colder.

"Angelique, if you feel cold, put on your cloak."

Angelique's steps halted, and mine followed. I turned slightly to look at her and waited patiently as she opened her backpack. Hers was noticeably smaller

than mine, used to carry her personal items. A few pieces of clothing and not much else. But it was a sturdy accessory that helped lighten my own load.

The cloak Angelique wore was just a large piece of gray fabric sewn at the top to form a loose hood, fastening with a clasp at the collarbone. It wasn't ideal for this situation, but it was what we had. I made it myself. A woman taught me to sew in Amere, before that, I had never touched a needle.

"Ready."

I nodded once at her statement and continued walking, this time with Angelique by my side. With the hood covering her head and the fabric hiding most of her body, she looked like something out of a medieval fantasy tale, or so I thought as I glanced at her cloak billowing over the white flowers.

"Alez."

"What?"

"About these flowers..."

"Yes?"

"I have a question."

"And what is it?"

"…"

Silence fell between us for several seconds. Only the wind and the occasional distant bird song adorned the environment. After pondering her question, Angelique raised her voice slightly without taking her eyes off the path ahead.

"What kind of flowers are these?"

My knowledge of gardening was—and still is—limited, to say the least. I knew a few names of very common plants, but it had never been a topic of much interest to me. However, I didn't feel right showing my ignorance then. Not because I wanted to appear knowledgeable to the young girl

accompanying me, but because it was such a rare event for Angelique to initiate a conversation, and I didn't want to cut it short so soon.

"I think... I think they're carnations."

"Carnations?"

Angelique looked up at me, her eyes filled with a curiosity that was unusual for her. In hindsight, it's no wonder Angel is so beautiful today, considering she was such a lovely girl back then.

"Yes, carnations. Look at that white color, they must be carnations."

"I see... carnations..."

After murmuring the name of the flowers—or rather, the name I believed belonged to those flowers—she returned her gaze forward in silence.

"Do you like flowers, Angelique?"

"Yes."

"But you don't know much about them."

"…"

"Angelique?"

"I think I know a few things."

"Oh... you mean, things you remember from a long time ago?"

"I don not know. I don't remember ever reading about them, but still... I feel like I could recognize several species without thinking too much."

"I see."

'Maybe there are things that, one way or another, people can't erase from their memories,' I thought. It wasn't much, but it made me feel good to know that even Angelique had something she enjoyed. And I would certainly keep that in mind for later.

I didn’t notice exactly when, but at some point, the wind started gaining a lot more strength. It was no longer as pleasant as before and began to be genuinely

bothersome. Yes, the sun was warm, but the wind still chilled my face. I remember the birds had also stopped singing—maybe they sought refuge when the weather turned worse? I had no idea.

My companion and I didn't slow our pace or stop to wait for the wind to subside. We both knew it was always better to end up exhausted but sleeping under a roof than resting out in the open at the mercy of nature. Minutes passed, and the sky began to take on that orange hue that has enchanted melancholic souls for millennia; not me. In my situation, seeing the sky that color without yet having found shelter only meant I had to hurry.

"This field seems endless..."

"..."

"Besides the birds from earlier, I haven't seen or heard any other animals. Not even rabbits or hares."

"..."

"In the worst case, we'll sleep out here,

find the-"

"Alez."

"Hm? Why are you stopping?"

Angelique had interrupted my speech—something already very unusual—and had stopped walking. The frail teenager stood still, staring ahead as if paying attention to something. I followed her gaze but found nothing—only flowers, flowers, and more flowers in that direction. The blooms disappeared from view only when the sloping terrain rose enough, which happened about a hundred meters ahead.

"I think... I heard something."

"Something? Explain."

"Voices."

"..."

A voice could only mean a person, and in our circumstances, every person we encountered was almost certainly a hostile target. I gripped my rifle's handle tightly

and, without thinking twice, switched off the safety, then turned to look at Angel again, speaking in a nearly whispering tone.

"Angelique, are you sure you heard a voice?"

"Yes."

"How sure?"

"Very sure."

Short words and a concise message, I had no reason to doubt what she said. It wasn't unusual for her to have heard something that slipped under my radar, given that, unlike Angelique, my hearing was already damaged by years of listening to gunpowder deflagrating inches from my ears.

"And those voices came from the path we're on now, right?"

"Yes."

"Don't let your guard down and alert me

to any movement around us or any other voices you hear."

The young girl just nodded once and walked behind me at my pace as I took the initiative to continue crossing the field.

"Angelique."

"..."

"I want you to remove the safety from your pistol."

"But... Alez, I-"

"I know, you've barely had a chance to practice, but it's better to shoot at least by instinct than to end up dead without firing a single bullet."

"Understood... yes."

Angel followed my order immediately. She reached inside her cloak and pulled out the weapon she had hidden in the back of her shorts, secured by her belt since we hadn't found a holster for it yet. I heard the metallic click as the safety was turned

off, and I looked at the pistol she held with both hands.

Steyr M9. Angelique had only fired it once before for practice. Because of this, she wasn't at all used to handling the weight of a full magazine, so she only had six bullets ready to fire.

With extreme caution and a slow pace, we continued up the small hill; the iron sight of my ACE was already at the level of my right eye, and the index finger of my right hand was just millimeters from the trigger. If anything other than Angelique entered my line of sight, I was more than ready to eliminate it in an instant.

"Do you hear anything else?"

"No."

Both the angel accompanying me and I kept our voices very low and walked at a very slow pace. Occasionally, I glanced in Angelique's direction to make sure she stayed close to me. Her hands gripped the pistol tightly, and her fingers trembled

slightly. Poor thing, she must have been terrified. Her face barely expressed a faint discomfort, but the rest of her body, slightly hunched and with a nervous look, spoke for itself.

Eventually, we began to rise more and more on the white hill, and after fifty or sixty meters, we finally saw traces of civilization.

No more than twenty meters away was what we had been searching for hours: the house of whoever once owned all this field. It was a building with a sturdy appearance. The white paint was chipped and faded, but the tiles protecting the two floors of the building looked in good condition. A main wing and next to it, a large shed that served as a garage for a tractor and a heap of scrap metal that was once a car.

"We're at the back of the house, maybe they used this as a patio."

"Why?"

"Why do I think that? Look."

With my rifle, I pointed out several points of interest to Angelique.

"A stone table. Those look like remains of a clay oven and... over there are various things piled up, that doesn't belong in a patio, probably looters. Barrels, electronic waste, ruined furniture... and other things. Whoever you heard seems to be getting rid of things they don't want inside the house."

We didn't stop moving. While I explained what each thing I saw meant, we passed by the pile of junk without paying it much attention, as at that moment, we had to focus mainly on the windows to gather information. We didn't know how many there were or how they were armed, so we had to be very careful. But... how careful can one be? I myself have ambushed men who seemed hundreds of times more cautious than me. Yes, you can never be completely sure.

Just five meters from the back door of

the house, we stopped to memorize the position of the windows. There was a wooden door that seemed sturdy, and the wall was filled with white-framed windows every two meters on both floors.

I placed a hand on Angelique's shoulder to get her attention and then pointed with a finger to my right ear, to which she responded by shaking her head once; that meant she hadn't heard anything suspicious again. I let out a silent sigh and resumed my grip on my rifle. My intention was to start an invasion of the house to eliminate the hostiles by surprise, but just as I was preparing to run and kick the door open, I heard the characteristic sound of glass breaking coming from one of the windows on the second floor. The muscles in my arms tensed, and I couldn't help but raise my voice, which had been a whisper until then, to a shout.

"Raise your weapon and search the windows!"

I gave that order and proceeded to obey it. I raised my Galil and it didn't take me long to pinpoint the exact broken window, but although I aimed in that direction, there was no target to shoot at.

"Nothing, maybe...".

It happened too quickly for me to react. I only remember hearing heavy objects being moved aside and then the now-so-familiar sound of a rifle being wielded a few meters behind me. A man emerged from the pile of junk, shouting in English.

"*Move an inch and you're a dead man!*"

'Move and I'll shoot,' a clear threat to which I could do little. There's no worse situation out there than being ambushed from behind.

"Alez! What-?"

"Don't move. Drop your weapon and

put your hands on your neck. I'll think of something."

Looking at me with a noticeably worried expression, Angelique hesitated for a moment and then dropped her M9. The pistol fell hidden among the white flowers, and the girl placed both hands behind her head.

'Her weapon is lost,' was my first thought. Finding it again among the vegetation would take several seconds we didn't have. The white field ended one or two meters ahead, if only we had walked a bit further before stopping, perhaps everything would have been easier.

"*Follow the girl's lead, Frenchie. Drop your weapon!*"

'Frenchie.' He seemed to believe I was French because that was the language I spoke to Angelique in. The guy pressured me to drop my weapon, and I was sure he wouldn't give me more time. I had no

choice. I slowly removed the strap of my Galil and let it fall to the side. I wasn't completely defeated yet, as I had my Beretta hidden under my clothes.

Like Angelique, I placed both hands on my neck. I glanced at her and, taking advantage of the language barrier, tried to calm her down without the attacker understanding what I was saying.

"Don't get upset, control your breathing. I have a plan, I just need to know exactly which window the other guy is in to carry it out without fail. This time... I need your help, Angelique. You-"

"*Shut your mouth! Do you think this is a fucking joke?!*"

"You have to pay attention to me, ignore the guy behind us."

I tried to keep my voice as low as possible while speaking at great speed, the nerves of the situation causing me to start getting impatient.

Hidden on my right side, concealed

from view thanks to my coat, were two devices that could get me out of this predicament: a stun grenade and a smoke grenade. With the second one, I could conceal our presence to relocate and eliminate the hostiles with my pistol, but that would be impossible without first stunning them since the smoke would take a few seconds to cover both Angelique and me.

"Listen carefully: when you hear the pin of the grenade being pulled, close your eyes tightly and cover your ears. After the noise, you can open your eyes and then throw yourself to the ground to grab your pistol."

"*I told you to shut the fuck up!*"

He fired. The armed man fired a bullet at the wall five meters in front of me to intimidate me. It had no effect on me, of course, but Angelique flinched at the explosion.

As I glanced sideways at the windows

searching for our lone enemy's companion, the latter started approaching very slowly, moving some objects that I couldn't see but could hear. Time was running out. By the time he got close enough to restrain me, my plan would have failed. I swallowed saliva in a vain attempt to get rid of the horrible dry sensation in my mouth and took a breath. Where the hell was he? There weren't so many windows in the house, and only one was broken. I refused to believe that he had left his companion alone just to deal with both of us; that would have been a very reckless move.

There might have been about four meters between the pile of trash from which the loud guy emerged and us; it wouldn't take him too long to reach me even if he walked very slowly. And the second one was nowhere to be found. He simply wasn't anywhere. I opened and closed my right hand, still held against my neck, preparing to trigger the stun grenade when the first enemy got too close. Twenty or thirty seconds, it wouldn't take

longer than that to arrive. The wind blew and blew, and my eyes went from one side to the other. I couldn't let myself be killed there, but I didn't have the upper hand either. And even though I had experienced similar situations countless times, it was different now that Angelique depended on my decisions.

"Alez..."

Angelique spoke, preventing me from making a hasty decision. My heart, which had been beating as fast as a mouse's until then, slowed down instantly—or at least that's what I felt.

"I hear something... behind the door."

The second enemy.

Three seconds after Angel's words, the sturdy door opened with an annoying creak, and the other hostile emerged from inside. He wore a balaclava and carried a shotgun; I remember the model was a

Remington 870. If he shot us with something like that at this distance, he would turn us into mincemeat. This second enemy was less cautious than the first, and that was all I needed.

It was risky. It was terribly risky, and maybe I could have made a better choice.

The shotgun-wielding man hurried to approach us and said something to his comrade, which I don't remember because at that moment I was fully focused on the movements of the terrible 12 gauge in his hands.

As slowly as a human could, I moved my right hand away from my neck and proceeded to slide it stealthily down my neck. I had to bring it to the back of my hip to take the first grenade, but I couldn't let either of the two men notice my movements. I started sweating. The guy behind us replied something to the balaclava-wearing one, and he replied. They seemed to be arguing. I remember something about what to do with us. If my memory serves me right, the one with the

shotgun wanted to get rid of me and keep Angelique, while the other wanted to keep me alive.

I swallowed saliva again and glanced at Angelique out of the corner of my eye, still moving my hand. Poor thing was terrified. Her expression was worried, although not too much, but there was a drop of sweat falling down her cheek, and her two hands were shaking.

The argument heated up, and the guy behind raised his voice as he said something about keeping me as food; by this point, my hand was already moving down my chest.

Do you know that feeling when your pulse is so high that you can feel the artery in your neck throbbing? Well, that's what I was going through at that moment. The seconds were eternal, and every centimeter I moved my hand seemed to take an hour.

The guy with the balaclava didn't have his finger on the trigger and wasn't aiming at us either, giving us some time to attack him, but we didn't know the first one's

position. Maybe he was aiming at us ready to pull the trigger, or maybe he had already lowered his weapon; we couldn't tell.

My hand was already going down my abdomen; just a few more seconds, and we should start my plan. What if it failed? What if the guy with the 12-gauge blew my head off even before I threw the second grenade? Doubts began to assail me; suddenly, my idea didn't seem so good anymore, and the fear of being killed right there took hold of my body. But... it was already too late to regret. I already had the stun grenade in my hand.

I closed my eyes tightly, discreetly took all the air I could, and pulled the pin. The metallic noise caught the attention of the three people around me. Angelique was very quick to cover her ears, but the other two could only look in my direction as I threw the grenade from my waist towards them.

A stun grenade has a detonation time of 1.5 seconds; I didn't have the chance to cover my ears, but the two hostiles didn't

even react.

The grenade detonated, and suddenly all I could hear was a horrible ringing that completely disabled my hearing.

"*What...?!*"

"Angelique, now!"

I took the second grenade, unable to know if Angelique had responded to me or not, removed the pin, and threw it right in the face of the rifle-wielding enemy—which I only then saw corresponded to an AK-. Even if I could act after the stun grenade exploded, it was purely out of adrenaline. My ears were blocked, and my sense of balance was out of control.

The smoke from the second grenade began to invade the space around us, and I threw my whole body over the shotgun guy. I had to finish him off; a single shot at that distance could kill both Angelique and me. The man was completely disoriented and confused, so I was able to throw him to the ground without

problems and grab his weapon, crushing his hand on the grip with my right knee. The next thing I did was hit him with both hands in the face to cause more confusion if possible and make him drop his weapon, but the guy was tough and resisted. The smoke was no longer ignorable and made it difficult to see, even being so close to my enemy.

I didn't know what Angelique was doing; I could only trust that she had followed my instructions and had taken her weapon. I, for my part, had to focus on my objective, battling with the smoke and my inability to hear anything.

After another blow to the face, the man beneath me let go of the shotgun but not to surrender, instead returning a punch to my side, all while opening his eyes. The unexpected blow deprived me of oxygen for a second. My enemy had already regained his vision, and I was still recovering from the ringing in my ears. I endured the pain in my side and delivered a blow to his left cheek, then another to the right followed by another to the left;

my aim was to overwhelm him with the same attack until he lost consciousness, but he was truly a tough guy. He grabbed my throat with one hand and threw me aside, then got on top of me, pressing my chest with his left knee. Amidst the smoke, it was nearly impossible to see beyond my own hand, which is why I believe he didn't try to retrieve the shotgun.

My ears gradually began to recover, and I could hear the breathing coming from behind the balaclava.

I threw another punch towards his face, but this time he was agile enough to evade it without getting off me, and then he pressed my neck against the ground using his left hand. On pure instinct, I managed to grab his arm with both hands to try to remove his hand, but he was putting all the weight of his body into that grip. I heard a blade being unsheathed nearby, and my eyes widened in surprise; there was a knife in his right hand. He raised his forearm about thirty centimeters and then forcefully lowered the tip of the knife

towards my chest. I was quick and stopped the attack by holding his wrist with my left hand, but I couldn't hold on like that for long. The grip on my throat was slowly depriving me of air, and my arm was losing strength; the knife was coming down. The blade was just a hand's distance from my body; a momentary distraction meant death. However, it was a moment like this that I was waiting for.

He had both hands busy attacking me, while only one of mine was dealing with stopping the knife. I quickly lowered my right hand and took my Beretta from the back of my coat, hidden in the holster sewn to the fabric. In less than a third of a second, I released the safety and placed the barrel against my assailant's abdomen, as it was the most vulnerable part of his body from my position. I fired twice, and the force in his arm diminished instantly as the man fell to the side.

The noise of the shots worked to uncover my ears and bring me back to reality. I quickly grabbed my enemy's hand holding the knife to use his arm as a guide and

brought my pistol to his head. I fired two more times. He was dead.

It was then, having momentarily freed myself from danger, that I paid attention to what was happening around me. The wind wasn't blowing as strongly as before, but it still blew; the smoke would dissipate in a few seconds. Moans and shouts reached my ears; Angelique was fighting with the other hostile.

"Angelique! Shoot!"

Why wasn't she using her weapon? Had she been unable to find it? The smoke still prevented me from seeing, and anxiety consumed me.

I was there, lying among the flowers, watching the smoke while I heard Angelique letting out painful groans as the man yelled words that I can't remember. I thought about shooting in the direction of the male voice, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't pull the trigger as long as there was a chance of harming Angel. Seconds

passed, and the struggle didn't stop, until suddenly both voices ceased and were replaced by gunfire. Five bullets were fired rapidly one after another.

"Angelique!!"

Nothing. There was no response. A lump formed in my throat, and I raised my Beretta towards the last noise I could perceive.

Two seconds, four seconds, six seconds. Nothing. There was no noise.

"Angelique, you must respond, or I'll open fire!"

I didn't want to believe it. I needed to hear her voice. Even if it meant being killed, I couldn't shoot if I wasn't sure Angelique was out of my sight.

The wind blew again. This time it was powerful, bringing so much force and lasting so many seconds that it began to dissipate all the remaining smoke from the

grenade. I tightened my grip and prepared to see the worst; to shoot if necessary.

Then, with a corpse with a blown skull next to me and several orange rays illuminating the metal of my pistol, I witnessed what is probably the scene that has been most vividly engraved in my retina in my entire life.

"Angelique..."

She stood there, about four meters from my position. In her small hands was a smoking barrel, and at her feet, a corpse. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, and her gaze was fixed on the body in front of her. Her hair was disheveled, and blood ran down her cheek. The clothes around her chest were soaked in blood, as was her left forearm. At some point during the struggle, the clasp of her cape had come undone, letting the fabric fall to one side, which was now being dragged by the wind. Her expression was blank, and her lips were trembling. The last bit of smoke

was blown away by the will of Aeolus and the rays of Apollo, which were not yet entirely tinged by the sunset, illuminated the girl and her surroundings. With this change in atmosphere, she lowered her hands a bit and slowly raised her head to look at the sky. The current made her hair sway, and the sun highlighted her eyes as if they were two jewels.

At that moment, Angelique, surrounded by white and red flowers under a faint orange hue, was the most beautiful person on Earth, and only I was there to appreciate her.

. . .

We spent several minutes without moving until everything around us was bathed in an intense orange tone.

"..."

I stood up, shaking my clothes, and went to fetch Angelique's cape along with the

clasp, then stood by her side, hiding her in my shadow. At this, she seemed to come to her senses and turned her body to face me. Gently, I took the pistol from her hands, secured it, and placed it in my pocket.

"... You did very well, Angel."

Of course, she didn't respond. I put the cape around her neck and secured it with the clasp. Angelique lowered her gaze as if she were thinking about hundreds of things, and I, perhaps still not fully aware of what I was doing, took her cheek in my hand and wiped the blood from her skin with my thumb.

"You really... you really did very well. Let's go inside, you need to rest."

I turned my back and went to retrieve my rifle, but I didn't hear her footsteps following me, so I decided to turn around. Angelique couldn't take her eyes off the

corpse at her feet. She had killed. For the first time, she had ended someone else's life, and perhaps she was processing it. Just... just remembering that moment hurts me. Angelique's hands had become dirty, and it was my fault.

"Angelique."

The young girl lifted her head and looked in my direction. I could tell that her eyes were watery, but she blinked a couple of times and erased any trace of a possible tear.

"Alez."

"Yes?"

"I don't think... I don't think I will be able to sleep well tonight."

"Don't worry, I'll stay awake nearby until you can fall asleep. How does that sound?"

There was no vocal response; the girl simply nodded very weakly and walked

towards me.

. . .

That night, Angelique struggled to fall asleep, but I... I couldn't even close my eyes.

Feb. 20, 2021, 6:58 p.m. 1 comments

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August Forneart @channich (/en/u/channich/)

Very good work, Hazo! Your approach to dialogue (eliminating captions) works well for you most times. And your pacing is fantastic throughout.

I would just recommend one more proofread as some

word choices may not have been optimal due to the translation. There are also only a couple word choices that I think could have been better. For instance, toward the end you say "was already tainted by the sunset." The word tainted evokes negative emotions. I think "bathed by the sunset" would work better there.

But I'd say you definitely got better from the first chapter. I will always be reading more to support you! ^.^

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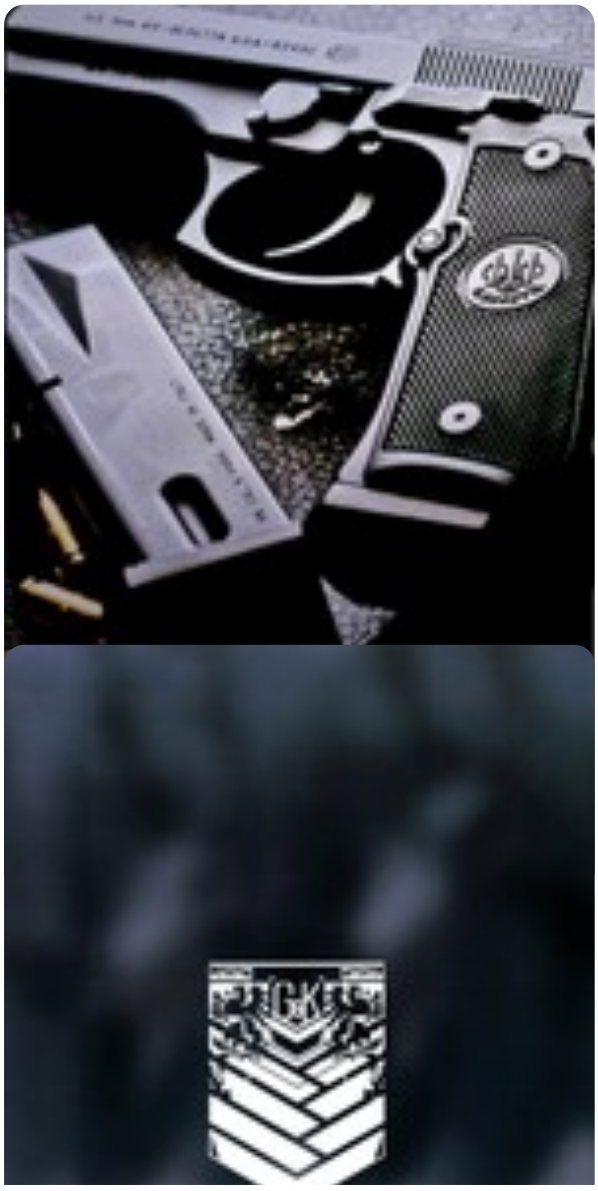

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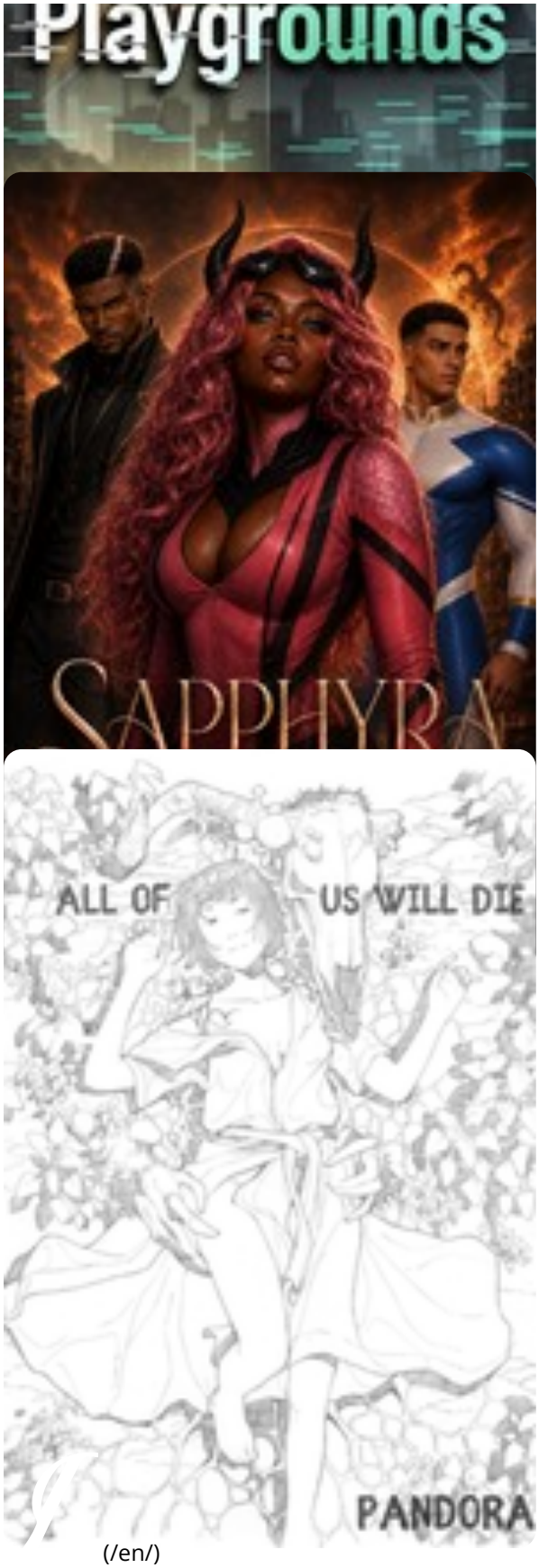

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